DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 112 PS 025 320

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TITLE Understanding the Parent Education Needs of Incarcerated Fathers.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations (Kansas City, MO, November 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Fathers; Focus Groups; Interviews; Parent Attitudes; Parent Background; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Education; Parent Responsibility; *Parent Role; *Prisoners
IDENTIFIERS *Incarcerated Parents

ABSTRACT

This study examined parent education needs of fathers incarcerated at a state correctional facility. Focus groups and follow-up individual interviews were used with 30 fathers ranging in age from 17 to 28. All of the men had at least one child 6 years of age or younger. The sample represented a range of cultural and family backgrounds. The findings of the study suggested five themes. First, fatherhood has a profound influence on men's lives and may be an important motivation to build a more responsible and mature lifestyle. Second, the quality of the attachment relationship is variable and is often influenced by the tenuous nature of the father-child relationship and a strained relationship with the child's mother. Third, there is a number of ways that incarcerated fathers maintain contact with their children, including visitation, letters, phone calls, and sending money or presents. Common emotions around interacting with children during visitation at the prison included ambivalence, embarrassment, and discomfort. Fourth, incarcerated fathers have unique parenting concerns, including (1) their inability to fulfill role expectations of provider, protector, and role model; (2) limited ways to express care and concern directly to their children; (3) problems in the relationship with their children's mother; (4) explaining time spent in prison to their children; and (5) the transition to the world of work. Fifth, although incarcerated fathers have parenting interests similar to fathers in general, they have many unique concerns, such as legal issues, children's questions about jail, and controlling anger. (KDFB)

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Understanding the Parent Education Needs of Incarcerated Fathers

National Council On Family Relations

Annual Conference: Kansas City, MO

Poster Session- November, 1996

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ED 407 112

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Introduction. There has been a great deal of discussion about fatherlessness and deadbeat dads (e.g., Blankenhorn, 1995) yet few connections have been made to the number of fathers who are currently in prison. There are approximately 1.5 million children with parents in prison (Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, 1992). The vast majority of these parents are fathers, yet little is know about fathers in prison (Adalist-Estrin, 1995). A recent study of fathers in prison (Hairston, 1989) suggests that fathers in prison do want to improve their parenting skills. Adalist-Estrin (1994) reviews recent research on parents in the prison system in the United States and makes a strong case for the integration of family support/parent education into our correctional systems. This study grew out of a request for parent education at a state correctional facility. The facility serves 800+ men who are young adults in a medium security facility. The staff at the facility had no records about the number of men who were fathers. The task of identifying the needs of fathers who are inmates was critical to the design of a parent education program that would be responsive to the needs of this particular group. This study focuses on more clearly defining the specific concerns and needs of fathers with young children. The study addresses five specific questions.

1. How do men in prison view fatherhood?
2. What is the state of father-child attachment for the fathers in this setting?
3. How do incarcerated fathers maintain contact with their children?

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4. What are the most pressing concerns of incarcerated fathers around parenting?
5. What do fathers in prison want to learn about parenting?

Method. The methodology used for this project was focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews of a smaller group of men who had participated in the focus groups. Thirty men participated in three focus groups. The men in these groups ranged in age from 17 to 28. This sample also represented a range of cultural backgrounds and family systems. All of the men had at least one child between the ages of 0-6. Twelve of the men were then interviewed for approximately an hour with open-ended questions relating to family situations, male socialization towards fatherhood, attachment experiences with children and the influences of fatherhood on their own development as adults. This group also participated in a 12 week parent education class. A second cohort of 15 fathers went through a similar process of individual interviews and 12 weeks of parenting sessions. Their interview responses are also included as part of the results. The second cohort was similar in demographics to the first group. The results are based on the 27 fathers who participated in individual interviews and attended parenting sessions.

Results. The results of this study are reported as themes that come from the individual interviews in relation to the research questions. The experiences and discussions of the class have been a filter for understanding and interpreting the initial comments from the interviews.

1. Fatherhood as an influence- The influence of fatherhood on men's lives has been profound in many ways. The men in this study expressed the importance of fatherhood through their participation in the study. They described some of the

changes that fatherhood has had on their lifestyles. Many of the following comments also reflect an ideal. As men met and talked in classes it was clear that their children were an important motivator; but it was not always easy to make the changes that they wanted to make to turn their lives around.

"Fatherhood has brought maturity, more value to life..kids come before you. It has brought me away from things..friends, drugs ..my #1 priority is my family."

"It made me mature more, focus on my goals for the future and kind of give me a kick in the butt and tell me to get going. No more wasting time, the partying is over now, it is time to get serious."

"The first one I was so young so it didn't really change me, it made me say well I got a kid and I have to do this and that. But I was still in my child mold and trying to be wild and trying to find myself. When my second one came then it was getting serious, but I always kept working jobs from the age of 14 or so. So that is how it change me..even when I wasn't going to school, I tried to stay in a program to get my GED so I would have something for them."

"..She is my baby. I love her, and that is gonna play a major role..the change in my life..is being more careful as an adult..Stop drinking, stop cursing, go to church, achieve my GED. Other things i have been doing for my daughter and myself, but if I had no daughter I probably wouldn't have."

2. Father-Child Attachment- The quality of the attachment relationship was reported by fathers as variable from being very close to never experiencing a feeling of closeness. What is most striking about father's descriptions of attachment is the high level of stress that fathers feel and the tenuous nature of some of the relationships.

Many of the fathers began parenthood during their teen years which can be seen as a barrier in itself. The quotes that follow capture both the current state of the relationship from the father's perspective as well as some of the important stressors.

"..not really attached but want to be..feel love for him..want to take care of and be there for him not like my fathers."

"Connection with son..feeling of love. I was there to feed, bathe, everywhere I went he went with me. Knowing my scent, smiled at me, on the phone says "dada, I love you".

"It is pretty good, I feel he know that I am his dad. I get to see him every two weeks but it is not as good as I would like it to be because I can't be with him."

"Right now I really don't think too much about him..with me being in here and he is forgetting about me while I am here."

"It is 3/4 of the way there..but not all the way there when I get out I can hopeful make it all. He will be able to talk back to me."

"I would say my relationship with my son right now is there but it is kind of surface. It is not more than what I want it to be under the situation. I still love him, I still care, but I wish I was there and that he was aware of me and really more what I am about. It is hard."

"My oldest is well, I don't want to say strained but it is difficult, he understands where I am and things like that but it is hard to not be able to see him everyday and talk to him. But he understands that I love him and we are able to talk and things like

that."

Some of the barriers to attachment that were reported are the lack of contact with child, strained relationships with the mothers of their children and some of the fathers' own ambivalent feelings about being close.

3. Contact with Children- There were a number of ways that men in prison report keeping contact with their children. The age of the child makes some ways like phone calls and letters more difficult. It is also clear from the interviews that contact often stimulates a set of emotions that are not always easy to manage and some men even reported not wanting to have contact because it is too hard. The primary forms of maintaining contact were:

A. Visitation- "it is hard to get the kids up here..two months and they have not been here"

"visited two times a week before the car broke down."

B. Letters- "through letters to child's mom.", "Write 1-2 times a month"

"I write him letters, and tell him that I love him. I draw him some pictures now and then."

C. Phone Calls- "Talking to her mother a lot, inquiring in what she is doing and how she is growing up." "Call on the phone every other night to my 3 year old."

D. Send Money/Presents- "I try to send pictures or money."

4. Immediate Concerns- There are five different areas of concern that were reported and appear to be unique to fathers in prison.

a. How do I let them know I care

"keeping in contact, let them know I love them. That is all I can do right now."

"Being able to talk and let them know I care"

b. Not available as a protector, nurturer, role model

" How can I be a good parent while I am here. I can't do anything while I am behind bars. All I have is a couple of hours with her and hold her . Otherwise I can't do nothing."

"I guess my major concern would be something major happening to them like an illness, well I don"t like to talk about things like this because that seems like when things like that happen. Any illnesses or things like that where I wouldn't be able to go and be with them at their time of need is hard. Like my father passed away a couple of weeks ago, and I wasn't able to go to the funeral which made it very hard, and it continues to be hard..Who knows what I would do if something happened to them, I might end up taking it out on another person which doesn't create anything but more problems."

c. Relationship with Child's mother

"Questions from child about marrying mommy, and keeping in touch with the mother of my first child"

"What if child's mother gets involved with someone else"

d. Transition to World of Work

" The major concern is that I get my education and get to the outside and apply.. and really do something"

"Setting self up for the future. Making sure and taking full advantage of my opportunity (here)"

e. Explaining time in prison to children

"..As much as I try and explain to him why I'm here, what this place is all about, sometimes I can't help thinking that maybe, I hope he doesn't get to thinking that it is alight, that it is okay. His mother kind of explains it as a time out, similar to when she sends him to the corner on a time out. I think he understands but I still worry."

5. Parenting Topics-The parenting interests of incarcerated fathers in many ways were similar to fathers in general. In addition there are some specific issues that emerged in the initial interviews and others that became apparent during the parenting sessions with both cohorts.

Typical Parenting Concerns

1. **Discipline**.."Don't want to hit or spank..spanking didn't teach me anything."
2. **Development**. "I want to learn about a child's thinking"
3. **Communication**- "Learn more about communicating with children of different ages" "Learn how to talk to a child and deal with their anger"
4. **Changing Role of Fathers**- " Learn what is expected from fathers, what a child needs from a father and how to be a good father"

Unique Interests

1. **Ways to stay close to children**- "Ways to let children know that you care"
2. **Legal Issues**- "I'd like to learn more about my legal rights around custody. What are available resources for fathers."
3. **Child's Questions about Jail**- "How to answer a child's

questions about being here"

4. Transition- "How to move into the relationship, and build it up again"

5. Communicating with Child's mother - This topic comes up during sessions in a variety of contexts from worrying about mother's caretaking to mother as a gatekeeper who doesn't allow for visitation or communication.

6. Controlling anger- "I need help controlling my anger"

Conclusions:

1. Incarcerated fathers view the role of fatherhood as a major influence on their lives. Fatherhood appears to be an important motivation to turn their lives around and attempt to build a more responsible and mature lifestyle.

2. The fathers in this study report a strong desire for a close relationship with their children, however the attachment process has been severely stressed by becoming fathers at an early age, limited contact with their children and the inherent limitations imposed by incarceration.

3. Fathers attempt to keep contact through visits (these are limited for most men by distance, financial strain and poor relationships with the child's mother). In addition fathers make regular phone calls to or about children, write letters and send photographs and cards on holidays. Many fathers expressed ambivalence about visitation and the embarrassment and discomfort around interacting with their children in a restrictive visiting room environment.

4. The fathers in the study reported a number of unique areas of concern around

parenting including: the inability to fulfill the typical role expectations of provider, protector and role model; limited ways to express care and concern directly to children, and ambivalent or antagonistic relationships with the mothers of their children; explaining prison to their children and the eventual transition to the outside.

5. Incarcerated fathers expressed interests around generic parenting topics such as understanding development, communicating with children and learning discipline techniques. In addition they also want to know about legal issues around custody, help with controlling anger, ways to stay close to their children, answering children's questions about prison, rebuilding relationships with children during the transition from prison and improving communication with the mother of their child.

Implications for Practice

1. It is important to spend time with incarcerated fathers to listen to their needs and concerns before constructing a parent education curriculum that will be sensitive to their needs. This process of individual interviews is an effective way to build understanding and begin to build a relationship with each father.

2. Build on the strengths that fathers express. Their genuine care and concern about their children and the desire to become responsible parents are some of the strengths discovered in this study.

3. Acknowledge the barriers that fathers in prison face and then encourage fathers to build a message of care and concern that can be expressed to their children in a creative and direct manner.

4. Address the tensions with child's mother and build a case for respectful communication as an essential step towards a healthy co-parenting relationship.

5. Sensitivity to diverse and complex family systems is helpful in assisting men in building healthy relationships with their children. Many fathers are involved in more than one family system and often have little direct contact with their children. These situations are difficult to manage and can create a sense of hopelessness.

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